

Sermon for Sunday, December 8, 2019 - "Ferocious Hope"

Second Sunday of Advent
December 8, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Our second reading today ends with powerful words about hope that are often used as a blessing at the end of worship: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Hope is such a powerful concept - it's a key theme in this season of Advent. But what does hope look like in practice? What does it feel like and sound like? What does it do?

This week I've been praying with a meditation entitled "Hope Sits in the Dark", written by a woman named Debie Thomas. Two years ago, Thomas' now 17 year-old son had a bike accident when riding home from school. He woke up with a cracked helmet, a few scrapes and a vicious headache. The headache hasn't gone away since. They've tried every kind of traditional and alternative medical intervention, but for two years now her son has been out of school and only able to be out of bed for four or five hours at a time.

In those two years, Thomas has learned a great deal about what it means to live with hope in the face of her son's chronic pain.

She writes, "When I read biblical stories of hope, the ones that resonate are no longer the stories of epic victories and grand celebrations ... "Instead," she reflects, I take hope in the story of Sarah, 99 years old and pregnant, laughing her head off because she thought for sure she was too old and wise and jaded to ever again be surprised by God. I take hope in the story of Hagar, a slave woman dying of thirst in the desert, who even in her abandonment becomes the first person in the Bible to name God. I take hope in the story of Hannah, who cries so hard and so earnestly in the presence of God that people take her for a disrespectful drunk. I take hope in the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who ponders hard mysteries deep in her heart. I take hope in the persistent widow who pounds down the door of a corrupt judge day after day after day, insisting on justice until she drives the man nuts. I take hope in the story of Mary Magdalene, who refuses to budge even when evil, tragedy, death, and despair seem to have won the day."

Thomas reflects that these stories teach her that "Hope is about the long haul and the long darkness. Hope is robust and muscular and ferocious and long-suffering. Hope never gets so cynical that it can't be surprised. Hope finds and names God in the world's most desolate places. Hope kneels on hard ground and yearns without shame. Hope ponders and meditates and ruminates. Hope gets in apathy's face and says, 'No. Not good enough. Try again.' Hope sits in the darkness - outwaiting torture, humiliation, crucifixion, and death - until finally a would-be gardener shows up at dawn and calls us by name."

As I reflected on these words this week, I began to notice that John the Baptist embodies this description of biblical hope. He is definitely robust and ferocious. He finds God in the desolate wilderness while kneeling on hard ground. He never lets apathy stand unchallenged. John also has a profoundly hopeful message, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Heaven has come to earth in Jesus and God's promised future is breaking into our world. The promised day in which there will be justice for the poor and the meek, in which the wolf will lie down with the lamb - that day is coming.

John shows us what hope looks like and sounds like and what hope does.

This realization surprised me as I tend to associate John more with judgement than hope.

But the thing is, God's judgement is also hopeful. The judgement that John announces means that there is hope for change, hope for something other than the status quo. It means that God is troubled by the pain and brokenness of our world and that God is at work to do something about it all - bringing the kingdom of heaven near.

And one of the ways that God works change is to call *us* to change, to call *us* to repent through the harsh words of John the Baptist. We're called to repent of everything that prevents us from clinging to the vision of God's hopeful future, everything that prevents us from participating in it. We're called to keep our faces turned toward this promise even when the night is long, even when the wilderness is vast, even when apathy infects everything around us. We're called to look to Jesus who will gather up the good wheat and burn away the chaff within each of our lives.

All of this feels like a tall order and it sounds really daunting coming out of John's ferocious mouth.

Yet, John's words also point to what God is able to do in and for us. "I tell you," John says, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." That is, God is able to bring new life even from lifeless stones. God is able to work faith and hope in us - faith that bears good fruit, hope that is robust and ferocious and able to cling to God over the long haul.

We can live with this faith and hope - not because of our own worthiness, not because we have Abraham or Martin Luther as an ancestor of faith, not because we are good religious people, not because we are so strong and resilient - because of what God is able to do for us and through us, what God is able to do for you and through you.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.